



THE NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Reviewing Stand

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Has Christmas Lost Its Religious Significance?

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System

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THE REVIEWING STAND is a weekly radio forum presented by Northwestern University. The program was first broadcast by Station WGN, Chicago, October 14, 1934. It has been on the air continuously since that time, originating in the WGN studios, and, since 1935, carried by stations of the Mutual Broadcasting System. **THE REVIEWING STAND** presents members of the Northwestern University faculty and distinguished guests from business, government, education, and the press in round table discussions of contemporary problems—the questions that are in the news. The program is under the direction of James H. McBurney, Dean of the School of Speech, Northwestern University, and Miss Myrtle Stahl, Director of Educational Programs, WGN, Chicago.

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Has Christmas Lost

Its Religious Significance?

MR. MCBURNEY: Our speakers today are the Reverend Eugene E. Bartlett, Minister of the First Baptist Church in Evanston, Illinois; Randall Cooper, President of Chicago's State Street Council; Lawrence B. Sizer, Divisional Vice President and Sales Promotion Manager with Marshall Field & Company; and Father Leo R. Ward, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame.

We are delighted to have two Chicago business men (representing, I might add, an enormous volume of Christmas sales) discuss the significance of Christmas with two clergymen. Do you men believe that we have commercialized Christmas to the point where we are losing sight of its true religious significance?

What do you say to that, Reverend Bartlett?

'Significance Lost'

REVEREND BARTLETT: I wouldn't hold that we have lost sight of Christmas in its original meaning entirely—obviously. I think we wouldn't be asking the question if we didn't have a sincere religious conscience about it, and yet, as far as the question itself is concerned, I find my thinking running more to the answer—yes, we have lost much of the religious significance.

I would also add, I think, that there are elements within our present observance which accelerate our losing of the religious significance. That, to me, is very much to the point of our discussion. I would feel that we are losing much of the religious significance in our current observance.

MR. MCBURNEY: What do you think some of the evidences of this growing secularization of Christmas are, Bartlett?

REVEREND BARTLETT: My impression is that there has been a growing emphasis upon the material side of Christmas. I mean there is an emphasis upon getting rather than giving, an emphasis upon things rather than spirit, an emphasis upon externals rather than an emphasis upon the inner meanings of the whole Christmas truth, of which all this should be a symbol.

MR. MCBURNEY: Do you agree with that, Cooper?

'A Great Deal Retained'

MR. COOPER: I can't quite agree with it. To the question, "Has Christmas lost its religious significance?" my answer would be "No." I think we have retained a great deal of what our fathers taught us in the way of religious significance, and as far as the commercial end is concerned, I would even go so far as to say that it might have helped to keep more people thinking of Christmas as far as its true meaning is concerned.

MR. MCBURNEY: Father Ward, how would you answer our question?

FATHER WARD: I tend to agree with Cooper on this question. Although we may have lost a great deal of the religious significance of Christmas, I think we have retained a great deal of it, also.

What I mean by that is that even in giving cards and little gifts to our friends, what we are saying is "I greet you on the occasion of Christ's birthday." It is not just any occasion; otherwise, I wouldn't be giving anything at all.

It is true that this is a great family event, a great friendship event, this business of Christmas as we have

worked it out in American life, but at the same time I think there is at the bottom of it a religious significance in the sense that we mean to say "Well, this is on the occasion of the birthday of Christ—not your birthday but the birthday of Christ." What Bartlett says is true, no doubt, that to some degree we have let the mere giving of gifts or the mere friendship or the mere family thing overshadow and dominate the religious thing, but I don't think they have swept it out of existence. I think most of the people that I encounter in this matter do retain a good deal of the sense of giving, almost in the name of Christ, or giving because Christ has come down into the world.

MR. MCBURNEY: How do you feel about the question, Sizer?

'Two Threads'

MR. SIZER: I think I can answer that best by reading a few lines from a book which we mail each Christmas to several hundred thousands of our friends and customers. It goes like this:

"Dear Public: Christmas to us is spun of two threads, Believing and Make-Believing. Like you, we believe in the spirit of Christmas, and we keep Christmas, first of all, as a thing of spirit. Like you, we believe that Christmas is first the quiet midnight church, the soaring Hallelujahs of the Messiah, the thankful family grace, the 'Glory to God in the highest; and on earth, peace, good will.'

"Like you, we believe in the promises of Christmas, that some day all men will live together in peace, with justice; that there is purpose and dignity in human life. To us Christmas is, above all, the light that 'yet in our dark street shineth'—our hope in war, our street in peace.

"But Christmas is make-believing, too, just as sure as it is children. It is Santa Claus in a white icing house, where the bedposts are made of lollypops and the doors have taffy pulls, and cookie cutters dance on the kitchen walls. It is the story and song and

sugar plum tree of your childhood, magnified a thousand times. It is the brief, beautiful point in time when your memories meet your dreams, and it is impossible ever to grow old.

"Yes, to us Christmas is both holy day and holiday."

MR. MCBURNEY: It is both holy day and holiday. Now, are you saying, Bartlett, in substance, that we are emphasizing the holiday, the make-believe, rather than the holy day and the believing?

REVEREND BARTLETT: Yes, I think I would take that position. I would even go on to say, first of all—acknowledging a very fine statement by Sizer—that Christmas is more, even, than those "two threads," that it isn't just the candlelight service in the church, or the singing of the Hallelujahs, but that Christmas has another significance, and that is the acceptance of the values for which Christ stood, the value of things spiritual over things material, the value of things which are eternal as over against things that are temporal, the value of personality as over against possessions, and so forth.

'Re-accepting of Values'

I think it is possible—and I believe this is being observed—that no matter how elaborate your external celebration of Christmas may be, either in the realm of belief or make-believe, if there is not a fundamental re-acceptance of the mind and values of Christ, we have not yet caught the religious significance of the season.

MR. MCBURNEY: Father, how would you express the true religious or spiritual meaning of Christmas?

FATHER WARD: Well, on that point there is one big central matter that we have all learned from our childhood. I think that in our childhood we all got a good deal of the Christmas story. We got the words, we got the meaning, we lived the thing, we dramatized it. It was dramatized before us in church and especially at home, in the Christmas celebrations

at home, with cribs and gifts and some notion of the Christ Child—perhaps something in the crib to represent the Christ Child—a manger, and so on.

We got used to those great words of the Gospel—such words as “She brought forth her firstborn and laid him in a manger because there was no room for him in the inn,” and the words, “An angel of the Lord stood by them,” and the great words, “Glory to God in the Highest.” Everybody loves those great words, and they have great significance, and people associate them, of course, with Christmas, and often hear those words in one way or another at Christmas.

‘The Essential Meaning’

I think the essential meaning of Christmas—its proper, ideal meaning—was best celebrated by Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and by the angels, and by the Wise Men who came soon afterward. I think we retain a lot of that meaning, too, and we never get over those words and their meaning. They have brought a lot into the worship life of people, not merely at church but also in the school, at home, and perhaps also in many ways in their business life.

MR. MCBURNEY: Do you think the giving of gifts is inherent in this conception of Christmas that has been developing here?

REVEREND BARTLETT: I think as a symbol it is a very important and inherent part. The only thing I would go on to say, however, is that the gift must be a means of expressing the central meaning of the season rather than becoming an end in itself. I am under the impression that the giving of gifts and the getting of gifts have become ends rather than means.

MR. SIZER: Father Ward, you have refreshed our memory with a number of the beautiful symbols that we connect so closely with Christmas. I’d like to ask you a question about a dilemma in which we find ourselves in the business community, and specifically in the department stores.

During the year, and particularly at

this time of the year, a great many of our good and sincere friends write us letters in which they strongly urge us to fill our stores and to use in our windows these various symbols of Christmas, with a strongly religious connotation. Our feeling has been that were we to accede to these requests and these suggestions, we might be guilty of commercializing.

I would like to have your viewpoint and that of Bartlett in that connection.

FATHER WARD: Sizer, I certainly feel that the people would criticize you at first for doing it, but I don’t think that is finally a sufficient reason for not using that approach for selling church goods. I don’t see why you shouldn’t sell religious articles, or why you shouldn’t have them in your windows at Christmastime or any other time.

Religion and Business

After all, Santa Claus was originally a Sixth Century saint, and presumably he has something to do with religious life, and we have him everywhere in the windows. Of course, we have lost some of the sense that he was a Sixth Century St. Nicholas; nevertheless, I do not see why we should divorce these two things—religion and business—and why your place should be considered simply a profane, secular place, your place of business, and that only the church or home or somewhere else is a religious place.

MR. SIZER: Well, of course, we do not so consider it. A few days ago two hundred of our people, our employees, who formed a choral society, spent an hour and a half singing in one of our large tea rooms for an audience of several thousand people. They delivered the entire “Messiah.”

At the same time, we have in our store a band of strolling minstrels who walk through and sing many of the well known carols, and also sing some of the better known hymns.

REVEREND BARTLETT: That’s a very good point. I think, for the purposes

of our discussion, I would say that having the choir or not having the choir does not particularly influence or affect the recovery of the religious significance of Christmas.

The great music of Christmas, the great symbols of Christmas, are still symbols. If you use these as an affirmation of a fundamental faith in the religious significance of the season, then I think that is a rightful use. However, if it becomes still an external, without a willingness on your part or an attempt on your part to make it an affirmation on the side of belief as over against make-believe, then I would question whether it would be rightful use.

Carols

FATHER WARD: Of course, that spirit has to go with it. I think a lot of that spirit is retained; that is my main point. No doubt a lot of it is lost. But as to the singing of carols on the air, in the streets, in the stores, in the homes—I'd like to see even more of that done.

People do serenade each other. I notice that in our school they go from hall to hall in the evenings before the boys go home for Christmas, and serenade us. I like to have them do that, and I think there is a good deal of spirit that goes with that—I mean genuine religious spirit that goes with the pep of those boys—and I feel the same way about your workers, perhaps, and the people who go up and down the streets in some of the cities, singing Christmas carols, especially boys and girls.

MR. COOPER: We feel very much that way, and as probably some know, we play Christmas carols and various other types of music for the Christmas season out on State Street, over our loudspeaker system. We are criticized occasionally for that, as Sizer said, but there was a statement in the paper the other day to the effect that here in Chicago there were some two million people who were said not to be members of any church, and we are wondering whether or not the

playing of Christmas music in the stores and on the streets—as long as it is done in good taste, as we feel it is—doesn't help to put into the minds and hearts of some of those people a little more of the religious spirit that they might not otherwise get, assuming that they are not members of any church.

MR. MCBURNEY: Cooper suggests the possibility that the promotion of Christmas by the stores might actually bring home the religious values inherent in Christmas to a good many people who would otherwise escape them.

'Setting not Religious'

REVEREND BARTLETT: I would question whether it actually does. It seems to me, Cooper, that the setting in which this takes place, and the associations with it, are such that it would be difficult to feel that it was making any real reminder of the essential religious nature of Christmas.

MR. SIZER: You're saying something that alarms me. If I felt that Christ were only in the cloistered halls of the Church, and was not to be found on State Street for the asking, I would be very much discouraged.

REVEREND BARTLETT: A very good point, and I agree to it. I think that one of the great emphases of Christ was that he was to be served in the market-place as well as in the sanctuary. I am asking, however, whether the use of carols and the use of the religious symbols is designed to affirm the fact that Christ is on State Street as well as in the sanctuary.

MR. COOPER: Well, I believe that the answer to that is partly in the fact that the men who promote this idea and who do this work at Christmas-time are men who have the Christian spirit in them.

REVEREND BARTLETT: That's right.

MR. COOPER: They are anxious to do whatever they can to help in this situation. I think it might even be asked as to whether or not there would be as much religion—and the

Christmas significance would be thought of as much today as it is now—if there hadn't been a retail promotion to help carry it along.

Non-church Goers

FATHER WARD: Cooper, that is a point on which I agree with you. You're asking the question, and I answer it positively. I think these millions—perhaps even millions in Chicago—who do not go to church, are reached with some religious sense and some religious spirit through the Christmas celebrations, especially, perhaps, through the carols and the programs on the air, the Christmas decorations, and Christmas celebrations. Some of them may be bad, but I think a lot of them reach those people. Some people, you know, go to church once a year, and that is on Christmas. Well, I think that is better than not going at all, going with your neighbors to celebrate together in the worship of God.

It may be pretty thin with a lot of those people; it may be pretty far between those worship meetings; it happens once a year. I think that is much better than no worship of God.

REVEREND BARTLETT: The one question I would raise is whether the final effect, however, is not to secularize the carol rather than to make sacred the setting in which the carol is played.

MR. COOPER: I think that depends entirely upon the thinking of the individual. Those of us who have a religious background and who were taught—as was said here a while ago—in our early childhood to believe in the religious significance of Christmas, still have that. We will always retain it.

REVEREND BARTLETT: Good.

MR. COOPER: It can't be lost. And I think that even though there are some who don't go to church, that will be brought back to them very forcefully.

MR. SIZER: I'd like to add to that point, Cooper. It seems to me that the evidences of Christianity must

vary with the surroundings. It is far easier to practice the outward evidence and the tranquility of Christianity in the open field or at Walden Pond than it is in a busy downtown street or in a business section.

REVEREND BARTLETT: I agree to that.

'Longer Selling Season'

MR. MCBURNEY: But do you think the tendency to lengthen the Christmas selling season and the terrific advertising campaigns that are put on at Christmas time to sell merchandise are evidences of the secularization that Bartlett, here, fears?

MR. COOPER: He would probably feel that it was, from what he said a minute ago, yet I think there is another side to the story. Actually, in many ways we haven't lengthened the time as much as it would seem. We are today promoting Christmas business, to a certain extent, a little longer than we did prior to the last war, but actually the number of store hours involved is much less today than it was many years ago.

REVEREND BARTLETT: I'd like to ask these men a question, really for information. The impression I carry is that the gifts purchased at Christmas have mounted and become more and more elaborate. In other words, we have moved away from simplicity, toward the giving of elaborate gifts. I'd like to know whether my impression is correct or wrong.

MR. SIZER: There are a number of interesting things to be said about the promotional possibilities in the Christmas season.

To begin with, it certainly is true that the total amount of Christmas business is greater now, in the average community, than it used to be; but if one studies it, one sees that this is obviously almost a direct reflection of the increase of the total purchasing power in the community.

It is a strange but interesting fact that each Christmas season has its own characteristics. In other words, inherent in each Christmas season is

a certain potential of total sales. These sales are there, regardless of promotional effort, and their total is chiefly determined by two elements: One, the purchasing power in the community, and two, the frame of mind in the community.

REVEREND BARTLETT: The obvious question, then, is "Why the promotion, Sizer?" At Christmas time there is a tremendous barrage of what appears to me to be promotion. Why?

'Same Total of Business'

MR. SIZER: I would answer that by using an example that Cooper likes to use. He says that the Christmas business is like a cake which is of a measurable size, and the promotional efforts in the Christmas season are efforts to increase the amount of the cake that each participant gets, but the total is the same. It cannot be increased.

MR. COOPER: There are other points, too, that I think ought to be brought into this early Christmas promotion. Yes, we do start it a little early, but we also try by doing that to avoid a lot of taut nerves, the wearing out of the clerk who tries to give a service, to say nothing of the families that want to shop.

REVEREND BARTLETT: I see.

MR. COOPER: I don't think it would make a great deal of difference *when* we start the Christmas promotion, so called. The people, the general public, would wait for a short time really to get going.

MR. SIZER: I would like to make one other statement about this subject of exploitation. It is a matter of fact that any business—or, specifically, any store—which participates in promotion and exploitation for exploitation's sake alone, will very quickly go bankrupt, because the store exists essentially as a service to a community. When a store ceases to serve the community, the community has a way of doing away with it.

FATHER WARD: That is a very inter-

esting point, Sizer, because you know the public often thinks that business men are in business for exploitation; they are in Christmas sales business for Christmas sales, and they are not primarily in that business to serve the community with something that it needs, as the good doctors in a community give it something it needs.

You seem to have quite a different idea for your own business, and for business generally. I hope what you think actually is the case with most business, that they can't stay in as a business if they go in for mere exploitation.

MR. SIZER: I think that is axiomatic.

'Sense of Specialness'

REVEREND BARTLETT: However, there does seem to be a point relative to our central discussion: Whatever the purpose of lengthening the Christmas buying season has been—and I think you have made a very valid point there from your side of it—still the effect, I believe, has been to take away something of the sense of the specialness of the Christmas season by lengthening it out, as it appears to me to have been lengthened. We lose something of the sense of what I believe ought to be an awe and reverence about the specialness, the highlighting of the birth of Christ.

MR. COOPER: But we feel, on the other hand, that if we shortened it, as you suggest, our nerves would be really shot by the time Christmas came along. In other words, by trying to level off this buying, which we actually do not control—it is here, and all we do is spread it around—by the time December 24th or 23rd comes, things have quieted down enough so that they can really do what you want them to do.

REVEREND BARTLETT: That is a very interesting point.

I am also interested in your phrase about nerves being shot, because, to my mind, that, in itself, is an indication that somewhere here there have come drives that are not what I believe to be the religious drives. Christ-

mas ought to be a time of uplift instead of leaving us exhausted, with our nerves shot.

MR. SIZER: How about Mother, after she gets the Christmas dinner? [Laughter]

REVEREND BARTLETT: Well, I suspect she is tired, too, and yet to my mind, for a whole culture to have to consider the way in which it arrives at a point of exhaustion because of the observance of a tremendously fine religious holiday, does raise a question as to whether other motivations have come in.

MR. MCBURNEY: Of course, a good Christmas dinner has its own rewards, even for Mother. You recognize that, don't you?

MR. SIZER: Right.

MR. MCBURNEY: Father Ward, do you have a word here?

Simplicity

FATHER WARD: Yes, I'd like to see some of that simplicity recaptured, the simplicity of the first Christmas. I understand, of course, that we are not going to recapture that altogether. In small communities, small towns and so on, in small parishes, that can, to a large extent, be done, but we are dealing in multitudes—really in millions of people and in millions of dollars of trade—and that simplicity can't always be there.

The simplicity of spirit might be retained. Perhaps it often is retained, but actually we are dealing now with a very large thing, and not with a small community, which, in many ways, would be my ideal.

MR. COOPER: We have questions put to us very often which are a little bit along that same line, getting back to what some people call the "good, old fashioned Christmas decorations." They ask why we don't just string red

and green lights on the streets and in the stores, and put Christmas trees up there, instead of other things. Whatever we do, whether it is the Christmas light or the Christmas music, maybe it helps to some extent to bring in that simplicity that you are speaking of, and levels it off a little bit, so that it isn't quite as commercial as it might be.

Charity

MR. MCBURNEY: The pastor of a large church out in Topeka, Kansas, has encouraged his parishioners to give to the church at Christmas time in the name of persons to whom they would otherwise present gifts. This suggestion is given on an attractive Christmas card and reads in part as follows: "Let us remember Christ on His birthday and remember friends and loved ones on *their* own birthdays." What do you think of that program, Father?

FATHER WARD: I think that people do now give a great deal in their churches, much more at Christmas than at other times. They give more in the street, to help feed the poor, to furnish Christmas dinners, and so on, than they would give at any other time outside of Christmas, but I think the giving of gifts as we have worked it out needs not be too much disturbed. For the most part, it is a giving between person and person, within the family and within the community that expresses the Christmas spirit, although it expresses the family spirit, too. This family habit, this friend-to-friend habit of giving gifts at Christmas, of course, need not be profane.

MR. MCBURNEY: Thank you very much, gentlemen. On behalf of the University and the staff of The Reviewing Stand, may we wish all of our listeners a very happy Christmas, and the kind of Christmas which you regard as best for you and yours.



Suggested Readings

Compiled by Eugen Eisenlohr
and M. Helen Perkins, Reference Department,
Deering Library, Northwestern University.



American Mercury 67:730-4, D., '48. "Natural History of Christmas." A DEVOE.

Discussion of the origins of Christmas, its significance and symbolic meanings in connection with Christmas ceremonies.

Christian Century 65:1262, N. 24, '48. "Commercializing Christmas Proceeds Apace."

The religious conception of Christmas may well be drowned in the flood of hi-pressure advertising and salesmanship.

Christian Century 64:1574-5, D. 24, '47. "Lord of Life."

An admonition to turn away from material gain, get off road of nihilism and return to the service of God.

Christian Century 66:1510-11, D. 21, '49. "To Rescue Christmas."

Deplores the crassness of our approach to and celebration of Christmas. Suggestions are made which would help remedy this situation and restore the religious significance of the season.

Christian Herald p 6-7+, D., '50. "Have a Christmas Service in Your Home." K. L. WILSON.

Christmas is no longer the festival of the home but of the department store. Some suggestions are given to recapture the real spirit of Christmas.

Christian Herald p 29, D., '50. "Light from a Nation's Christmas Tree." D. S. ERNST.

Christmas is our most universally observed holiday because it has brought so much hope, faith and cheer.

Commonweal 47:270-2, D. 26, '47. "Christmas Devotion." T. MERTON.

Meditation on the proper approach to Christmas, its spiritual significance and the interpretation of the Nativity.

Commonweal 47:245, D. 19, '47. "Christmas." C. G. PAULDING.

Christmas is a time for remembrance of old and new. The spiritual significance can never be forgotten, lost or destroyed.

The Hibbert Journal 146 No. 3:251-3, '47. "Christmas, Christianity and God—Some Reflections." B. H. LIDDELL HART.

The religious significance of Christmas has yielded to material ideas and men have become more conscious of scientific facts than of the light of God.

Life 25:20, D. 27, '48. "Tidings of Great Joy."

A rapid survey of the interpretations and celebrations given to Christmas through the past 20 centuries.

Parent's Magazine 25:26, D., '50. "The Hope that Christmas Brings." A. P. DAVIES.

Christmas brings to all the message of brotherly love, peace, kindness and hope. An opportunity to see for the moment a world of harmony, the mirage that we hope and know will become a reality in a not too distant time.

Parent's Magazine 22:23, D., '47. "Christmas Without Tears."

Suggestions for making Christmas last longer, for retaining the glow of affection and the pleasure of family teamwork.

Printer's Ink 225:42-3, N. 12, '48. "Merry Christmas; BLAH!" F. P. CONNELLY.

Instead of sending out stereotyped Christmas cards, make up a story illustrating the true spirit of the season. Canned Christmas messages are shallow and lack warmth.

Psychiatry 9:51-65, '47. "Christmas in American Culture." J. H. BARNETT.

A description of the myriad meanings Christmas has come to imply in American culture. It is felt that Christmas has become more popular since 1870 because it has been commercialized and thus shares this dominant trait in American life. A breakdown of the social functions performed by this particular holiday is included.

Reader's Digest 53:9-12, D., '48. "Keeping Christmas." D. W. CROWELL.

A description of the preparations for and celebration of Christmas in one family. The hope that this great holiday will remain the same without change is expressed. "For the Spirit of Christmas Is the Light of the World."

Recreation 42:416-17, D., '49. "It's Christmas Everywhere."

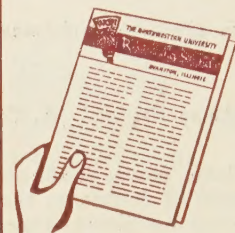
It is hoped that the spirit of Christmas, peace on earth, and the brotherhood of man will be passed on to future generations so that the significance of Jesus' birth will never be lost to man.

Spectator 181:827, D. 24, '48. "Christmas Reflections."

Christmas has always been a symbol of peace.

Vital Speeches of the Day 15:162, Ja. 1, '49. "Christmas Is the Family Day: Address at the Lighting of the Community Christmas Tree." H. S. TRUMAN.

Christmas is the spirit of peace, the time when all members of the family should be together.



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